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SUBJECT: TRIBES: A SILENT PLAYER IN MODERN-DAY SAUDI
FOREIGN POLICY

Classified By: Ambassador Ford Fraker for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Traditionally seen as a domestic issue, tribalism plays a key role in modern-day Saudi foreign policy. Tribalism affects which conflicts and issues the Saudi government (SAG) engages in, the extent of the SAG's involvement, and with which side it chooses to align itself. Despite the lack of tribalism within the ruling Al Saud family, the basis of its establishment -- namely the joining together of tribes under a common nationalist banner -- dictates that the SAG strongly considers the interests of the Kingdom's main tribes when engaging in any policy issue, including foreign policy. Tribal interests in foreign policy range from the support and protection of Saudi foreign fighters in regional conflicts to citizenship issues and financial contributions based upon kinship with foreign countries' tribes or tribal structure. END SUMMARY.

SAG Struggle: Saudi Foreign Fighters and Tribes

¶2. (C) Many foreign fighters in international, jihadist insurgencies come from Saudi Arabia. Most of these fighters have tribal backgrounds, which affects loyalty and recruitment tactics, and therefore, the stability of the SAG. This issue is currently most prevalent in Iraq, and it is one of the factors affecting the bilateral relations between the SAG and Iraqi government. Many of the Saudi foreign fighters in Iraq hail from tribes in Buraida, Qassim, or Ha'il-- specifically, the Shammari, Otaibi, Shahri, and Motairi tribes. Media reports indicate that recruitment of foreign fighters is largely through familial -- tribal -- relations, which would be only natural given the nature and cohesion of tribes. Many of the Saudi foreign fighters claim to be followers of Salafi Jihadism, which includes among its tenets waging war against the "infidel."

¶3. (C) This form of Salafism is extremist and became anti-Saudi establishment due to the SAG's positive relations with the West. As a result many Al-Qaeda members are followers of these beliefs, and the SAG's response to these followers affects foreign and domestic policy. These beliefs are far more extreme than the conservative, yet puritanical beliefs of Salafi thought or Wahabism, the official Muslim sect of the Al Saud family and the only officially recognized sect in Saudi Arabia.

¶4. (C) Despite the involvement of some tribal members in jihad, prominent members of the Shammari and Otaibi tribes told PolOff that the formal structure of tribal leadership is not affected by the War on Terror generally, or specifically by the war in Iraq. According to one of the Shammari tribal members, tribal leaders only deal with internal tribal strife. Terrorism is a crime, and therefore the responsibility of the SAG, not the tribes. However, he added that the war in Iraq affects the individual tribal members

because they consider "their tribal members in Iraq no different than the ones residing in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, destruction to them and their lands, no matter what the reason, is painful and must be avenged."

15. (C) An Otaibi tribal member, who is also a SAG MFA official, agreed with this sentiment, adding that, "The tribes contribute greatly to the cause of foreign fighters, but although the tribal members' hearts go out to their brothers in Iraq, there should not be violence." Throughout the course of 2007 and early 2008, PolOff spoke with dozens of tribal members, whose over-riding theme was the unimportance of geographic boundaries to the tribes. This attitude affects the tribes' outlook on foreign policy issues, especially on Iraq.

16. (C) Saudi foreign fighters are also an issue with Saudi-Russian relations. Beginning in 2003 with the visit of then-Crown Prince Abdullah to Moscow, the SAG has dramatically improved relations with Russia. However, tensions still arise in the bilateral relationship due to the conflict in Chechnya and the traditional role of Saudi foreign fighters there. One of the most notorious Saudi fighters in Chechnya is Abu Al-Walid Al-Ghamdi, from the Al-Ghamdi tribe, who has been leading Arab fighters there since 2002. Many Al-Qaeda members hail from this tribe, one of Saudi's largest tribes, including several involved in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as well as the May and June 2003 terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia. The SAG has refused to withdraw his Saudi citizenship, probably fearing the internal repercussions of this bold move against such a large tribe. Despite increased Saudi-Russian bilateral relations over the past five years, the issue of Chechnya is still one of concern, according to MFA officials. The SAG continues to keep tribal issues in its sights, since key

Saudi tribes compose a majority of the foreign fighters, while increasing its counter-terrorism efforts and working on rebuilding and strengthening its relations with Russia-- an important ally to Saudi Arabia on many fronts.

17. (C) Even in Lebanon, a country divided along sectarian and ethnic, but not tribal lines, Saudi tribal policy plays a role. According to the Damascus-based Al-Watan newspaper, Saudi Arabia's international image is shaped by its relationship with its tribes and its traditional tribal and Salafi thought. This is apparent in its relations with Syria and Lebanon. In summer 2007, during the fighting with Al-Qaeda-inspired Fatah Al-Islam in the Nahr Al-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon, many of the foreign fighters in the camp were suspected of being Saudi citizens. Publicly, Saudi Arabia repeatedly denied involvement of its government or citizens in this conflict, however, mounting evidence demonstrates Saudi citizen involvement.

18. (C) On February 24, 2008, the Saudi Gazette reported that the Saudi Embassy in Lebanon identified the bodies of two Saudi citizens who died during the fighting last year. Another body was identified and repatriated to Riyadh in July 2007. Currently ten Saudis are under interrogation by Lebanese authorities. Among the names of the deceased fighters, several were from tribal, not religious-based families, such as Obaid, a major tribe whose ancestors settled in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan hundreds of years ago. Interestingly, some of the fighters with "tribal" names took on more "Islamic" names when they joined Fatah Al-Islam, according to media sources.

19. (C) According to sources at the Arab States Department at the MFA, tribes "officially are not a factor" in the SAG's Lebanon policy. However, unofficially, tribes affect the SAG's entire foreign policy. The SAG down-played media reports of its citizens' involvement in the Nahr Al-Bared camp and did not provide much public support to the Lebanese Government during its fight. This contrasts starkly with the SAG's current support and intense public, international campaign to end the Lebanese political crisis, provide financial assistance to its government, and end foreign

interference from Syria in Lebanon.

¶10. (C) In addition to sometimes turning a blind eye to Saudi foreign fighters for tribal reasons, the SAG also uses tribes to reintegrate the returned foreign fighters into mainstream Saudi society. Under rehabilitation programs sponsored by the Ministry of Interior (MOI), family members and tribal leaders must accept responsibility for their kinsmen in order for them to be released from prison. If the detainee stops participation in the program, another tribal member would have to take his place in prison. The SAG is relying on the tribal structure as the main fabric in society in terms of maintaining security in the Kingdom. The importance of keeping the individual in line without humiliating him is imperative for the SAG because any undue duress suffered by a tribal member could spark the anger of his entire tribe, turning them against the SAG.

Tribal Culture: Kinship in Bilateral Relations

¶11. (C) The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) bases much of its cooperation on tribal ties since many of the tribes in the Arabian peninsula span several GCC borders. The Head of the GCC Department at the MFA, Abdullah al-Shamarani, told PolOff on February 18 that tribes are "not discussed, but understood" as part of the policy-making process in the GCC. Further to this point, the Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs at the GCC headquarters in Riyadh Abdulkarim Hamadi told PolOff that tribes play a "silent role" in the relations among the GCC member states. The GCC countries use their tribal culture to make common foreign policy in line with their tribal interests on major issues, such as citizenship policy. One major element of tribes is cohesiveness of the tribal unit-- be it for protection, promotion, or penalty-- and so the GCC countries avoid any policies that might threaten tribal integrity.

¶12. (C) All of the GCC countries boast large expatriate populations-- many of whom are Muslim and have lived in the respective countries for decades and even generations. Nevertheless, individual GCC countries have very restrictive citizenship laws, usually only extending citizenship to other GCC member states and spouses of GCC nationals. This policy has come under much criticism, especially from the Arab world, as many Arabs argue that the Gulf countries should grant citizenship to the stateless Palestinian people. Despite the GCC commitment to provide financial, social, and political assistance to the Palestinian cause, their charity

stops at citizenship as, according to Hamadi, unofficially, they want to protect the tribal cohesiveness and traditional ways of rule that non-tribal Arabs could challenge.

¶13. (C) Leadership and cultural aspects also play a part in GCC tribal politics, particularly as it concerns the SAG. There are countless examples in the Saudi media-- the amount of them increasing exponentially under the reign of King Abdullah-- to demonstrate GCC-wide interaction with individual cases of blood money, tribal poetry, and negotiations amongst tribal leaders. One example involved a 2007 execution of a Shammari tribal member for murder of a member of another, "lesser" tribe. Although the Islamic court ultimately carried out his sentence, Shammari tribal leaders from Qatar and Kuwait joined in the extensive public and private domestic efforts-- which included negotiations, poetry publications asking for forgiveness, and offers of financial support-- to intervene on his behalf and stay the execution. Royal family members also joined in on this campaign, ignoring the crime of murder, with the aim of supporting the existing tribal structure; however, all were ultimately defeated by the Islamic legal system in the Kingdom. One Shammari Saudi tribal interlocutor commented to PolOff that the tribes "know no geographical boundaries," and this trans-national nature is proving more evident in modern times with websites linking the tribal communities internationally, which enable broad support for individual

cases such as this.

¶14. (U) SAG involvement in bilateral relations outside of the GCC are also affected by the Kingdom's tribal culture. Pakistan has a deeply-rooted tribal culture, and even though its tribes are not related to the Saudi tribes, the common traits of tribal cultures-- cohesion, loyalty, protection, etc-- are shared by both governments and societies. Influenced by this commonality, there seems to be a "soft spot" for Pakistan in SAG foreign policy. Although their close historical ties date back decades and span a range of issues, an example of tribal influence in the SAG's policy is its support for former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

¶15. (C) In 2000 the SAG agreed to take Sharif into exile despite his conviction for corruption and other crimes by the Pakistani Supreme Court. Many media commentaries have cited "personal linkages" and "tribal mindsets and relations" as the reasons for such action being taken by both governments. Political Counselor Zahid Raza at the Pakistan Embassy in Riyadh told PolOff on January 21 that tribal mindsets "certainly influence" the bilateral relationship. According to the Raza, the broad relationship shows "understanding of the tribal culture and sensitivities" in both countries. Specifically as it relates to Sharif, the SAG returned Sharif to Pakistan less than two months prior to the scheduled presidential elections. According to the Pakistan Embassy and working level contacts at the MFA, Sharif's return was timed to exert his moderate influence in the uncontrolled tribal areas that were "exercising too much extremism and violence" on the border with Afghanistan prior to the elections. The SAG, understanding how the tribal structure works, wanted to assist the Pakistani government and help resolve the problem before it got out of control. On the eve of Sharif's return to Pakistan, King Abdullah stated in a farewell dinner that, "His heart beats with the people of Pakistan and he has great love for the brotherly country" -- a clear testament to the "soft spot" that the SAG holds for Pakistan.

¶16. (U) In the past year, the SAG has played an increasing leadership role in the region, working to resolve conflicts throughout the Arab world. In mid-September 2007, the SAG attempted to mediate the Somalia crisis-- a war-torn Arab League country, which has been without a government for over seventeen years. The SAG brought several key Somali leaders to Jeddah to finalize peace negotiations and sign a "landmark" agreement. However, this negotiation -- the approximately fifteenth attempt for Somalis, depending on how it is counted -- only involved the historical tribal rivals (also referred to as clan leaders) who compose the current Transitional National Government. It did not involve the Islamist-led opposition leaders who held their own conference in Asmara the week earlier. Without the opposition's presence or acquiescence, the SAG proclaimed victory at the signing of this peace agreement. The Saudi media noted the presence of the tribal members, both as participants and the over four-hundred male and female observers, throughout the conference, as well as the absence of the Islamist opposition. The SAG's decision to support the tribal forces of Somalia over the Islamist-led opposition is a clear example of the importance of tribes in Saudi foreign policy.

¶17. (U) One of the biggest foreign policy issues for the SAG is its bilateral relationship with Yemen. For decades, the SAG and Government of Yemen (GOY) have had boundary disputes that caused tension between tribes residing on both sides of the border. In 2003, Saudi Arabia attempted to build a fence along the border with Yemen, claiming the need to prevent smuggling of weapons and drugs. However, the Yemeni tribes located near the Saudi border are generally in opposition to the Yemeni government. As a result, they often cross into Saudi Arabia to seek support for their insurrection. Moreover, the GOY is ineffective at protecting the border with Saudi Arabia, which makes negotiations between the two countries on this issue largely unhelpful. The border fence

project was eventually abandoned due to intense disagreements with the Yemeni tribes on the border resulting in the death of dozens of Saudi border guards and tribesmen, and smuggling still remains a problem today.

¶18. (U) According to Yemeni media sources, the SAG still financially supports Yemeni tribal chieftains in order to ensure their loyalty and tractability as much as possible. An August 2007 article from the Yemen Times stated, "If the rulers of Sana'a do not succeed in improving law, order, and their responsibility on the border, Saudi Arabia can open the door for naturalization of Yemeni families and tribes." This possibility has been explored by the SAG, usually to the dismay of the local Saudi population. In late December 2007, an Arabic-language website dedicated to Saudi news and issues of concern to Ismailis in Najran, published an article titled "Despite Promises to End Resettlement, 'Secret' Document Reveals Steps to Resettle New Yemeni Tribes in Najran." According to the article, a letter signed by Najran's deputy governor calls for "allowing members of the Yemeni tribe of Yafi, who originally resided deep inside Yemeni territory, to benefit from educational services, send their children to Saudi schools, and be treated in Saudi hospitals pending their acquisition of Saudi citizenship." The letter further showed that Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abdul Aziz relied on the support of the Najran government to grant this tribe the same status as other Yemeni tribes already afforded these services and rights in Saudi Arabia.

¶19. (U) On February 18, 2008, a local NGO-type organization, Human Rights First Society, distributed an article titled "Saudi Shi,ites Oppose Plans to Settle Sunnis," referring to the resettlement plans mentioned in the earlier article. According to the 2008 report, the Ismaili Shi,ites of Najran sent a letter to the governor of Najran province protesting these plans. Also according to the article, "large billboards signed in the name of Yemeni tribal leaders had been erected to thank the local governor and senior Saudi royals for funding some of the housing projects."

¶20. (C) COMMENT: Tribal politics plays a silent, but critical role in Saudi foreign policy. The breadth of its influences on bilateral relations extends from nations outside the Arab world to the Kingdom's neighbors. The depth of its importance in foreign policy reaches into heart of Saudi Arabia, challenging domestic security and the stability of the House of Saud leadership. Recognizing the role tribes play in SAG bilateral relations will enhance understanding of the Kingdom's foreign policy, now and in the future. END COMMENT.
FRAKER